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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 SUVA 000100

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [ECON](#) [TN](#)

SUBJECT: TONGA: GRASSROOTS DEMOCRACY CONSULTATIONS MAKE
PROGRESS; REQUESTS FOR U.S. AID

REF: A. 05 SUVA 613

[1](#)B. SUVA 97

Classified By: Ambassador Larry Dinger for Reasons 1.5 (b) and (d)

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) The National Committee tasked with sounding out Tongans' views and aspirations on political reform is on the road, making progress. Members of the Committee are currently holding village-level consultations in Vava'u. Critics within the pro-democracy movement say the process is redundant. They would prefer that proposed constitutional changes go to a popular referendum ASAP. Committee chairman, Prince Tu'ipelehake, reports the consultations thus far have revealed a wide spectrum of views, from wanting significant systemic change to advocating continued support for the monarchy. The Committee is beginning media outreach to keep the nation informed of the consultation process. Disagreements over the Committee's work and recent developments in Tonga's political landscape, such as the naming of a pro-democracy commoner to acting Prime Minister, have highlighted internal differences within the pro-democracy camp. An attempt to resolve a fiscal crisis, in part by offering redundancies to public servants, will affect politics as well. See paragraph 9 for Tongan suggestions of how the USG can help the reform process. We continue to believe it important for the U.S. to be visibly on board. End Summary.

National Committee under way

[1](#)2. (C) According to Prince Tu'ipelehake, Chairman of Tonga's National Committee on Political Reforms, and Sitiveni Halapua, a Committee member who also works for Honolulu's East-West Center, the Committee is making good progress in its village-level consultations to assess attitudes on democracy and Tonga's political future. Tu'ipelehake and Halapua came to Nuku'alofa to meet with the Ambassador on March 3. They said that the Committee has spent two and a half weeks on Vava'u in the North. Thus far, it has visited 28 villages there, with 14 more to go. The pace clearly must accelerate, so Committee members have split into sub-groups to cover two villages per day. After Vava'u and other northern districts, Committee members will tackle the south, including Tonga'tapu, the largest population center and hotbed for reform. Only four Committee members, including Halapua, have devoted full-time to the visits thus far. Pro-democracy parliamentarians Akilisi Pohiva and Clive Edwards say they may join in when the Committee returns from the north. After canvassing Tonga itself, the Committee intends to send delegations to the U.S., New Zealand, and Australia, where most Tongan citizens now reside.

Remittances from that diaspora constitute most of Tonga's GNP. Following the consultations, the Committee must draft a report for the King and Parliament, due by September 1.

A mix of views

13. (C) Tu'ipelehake and Halapua reported that the talks have revealed a broad mix of views: from democrats wanting a new order, to those saying implementation of the present system just needs fixing, to full-scale loyalists of the monarchy. Some critics suggest turnouts have been light. Halapua stressed that village voices have been sincere and quite often sophisticated. In Vava'u, one of Tonga's most conservative regions where loyalty to the royals is probably strongest, a significant segment has expressed concern about change. One consistent anxiety is about maintaining current land rights, which are bound up with the King's traditional roles. Halapua said a "silent group" in Vava'u is skeptical or even hostile to the wave of democratic activism that led to the creation of the Committee and is "waiting to see what happens." Halapua suggested that group could pose a threat to peaceful political reform.

Committee needs a PD angle

14. (C) Tu'ipelehake said he perceives a need for the Committee to begin keeping the wider public informed of its work. As a result, on March 3, he and Halapua held a lengthy media conference in Nuku'alofa to report on progress thus far. Also, the Committee has invited a local journalist to accompany it during its further consultations. The Ambassador noted the importance of transparency and information flow in the Committee's work, particularly to keep people on Tonga'tapu informed, and he praised the decision to increase media outreach.

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Skeptics remain

15. (C) Critics, including from within the Committee's own ranks, continue to question its methods and overall plan. Pohiva claims that people's-rep parliamentarians have routinely surveyed Tonga's villages during the past twenty years. He sees the Committee's work as duplicative, perhaps even a covert attempt to placate the masses and delay democratic reforms. He also complained that Prince Tu'ipelehake's presence as Committee chair tends to create a stilted, traditional atmosphere at the village consultations, which stifles free and open expressions of commoners' views. Thus far, Pohiva and Edwards have not participated in Vava'u, though they leave open the possibility for their home island, Tonga'tapu. In an address at the University of the South Pacific in Suva on March 1, Pohiva predicted a "private bill" would be introduced in the May session of Parliament to call for an immediate popular referendum on a set of constitutional amendments to which Tonga's main pro-democracy factions have agreed. Tu'ipelehake told the Ambassador he has already warned Pohiva that the referendum bill would not pass.

Economic crisis: being fixed?

16. (C) Pohiva predicted to his Suva audience that Tonga's precarious economic situation would soon bring down the Government (Ref A). If it pays outstanding salary increases promised to public servants, it will be driven into bankruptcy. If it refuses, it would face a renewal of the 2005 strike by civil servants that brought democracy-activists' reform agenda to the fore. Interestingly, Tonga Finance Minister Siosuia 'Utoikamanu told the Ambassador that, despite the tight fiscal situation, Government has found a way out. In part, the solution involves tapping various pockets of unexpended funds. A major aspect is a "voluntary redundancy" package for 1000 civil servants, a quarter of the total, which would bring a

one-time cost of T\$22 million, but would save nearly that much each year thereafter. Tonga's public-service union has already threatened a strike over "redundancy," which it sees as contravention of last September's settlement.

What role the commoner as Acting PM?

¶7. (C) Tu'ipelehake said Crown Prince Tupouto'a's appointment of commoner and former "People's Representative" parliamentarian Fred Sevele as acting Prime Minister was a positive sign. The Crown Prince's views have evolved and he is prepared to accept changes to the political order in Tonga (see Ref B for further confirmation). Tu'ipelehake said the Crown Prince has supported the committee's work from its inception and has instructed government to "embrace" it. Not everyone sees the appointment of Sevele, a "People's Representative" until the King made him Minister of Labor, Commerce and Industries, in the same light. Pohiva still has confidence in Sevele, but Clive Edwards, a former Police Minister and current "People's Representative," said Sevele's ministerial roles and his closeness to the Crown Prince have raised doubts in the public's mind about his commitment to the commoners' cause. Edwards suggested the Crown Prince is, in fact, using Sevele to slow down the process of democratization.

Comment

¶8. (C) The fact that the National Committee's survey is proceeding gives some hope to those wishing a middle course between royal reactionism and pro-democracy action in the streets. However, it will be important for the Committee to continually demonstrate its viability in the next few months, a period which could witness the ailing King's death, or his refusal to accept the commoner Sevele as PM, or a return of public-service unions to strike action. The pro-democracy movement's constitutional amendments and referendum demand also wait in the wings. For now, though, dissidents like Pohiva and Edwards appear willing to see what comes, and even to participate in the Committee's consultations from time to time. So long as the current King's views remain unannounced, royal buy-in will be questionable, even with the Crown Prince's "embrace" of reform. End comment.

U.S. Role

¶9. (C) The Ambassador discussed with Tu'ipelehake, Halapua, Sevele, Pohiva, and Edwards several ways the USG might potentially contribute to Tonga's National Committee process.

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-- Australia, New Zealand, and to a small extent the UK have already provided funding for the Committee's day-to-day program of action. The USG has contributed indirectly since the East-West Center has seconded Halapua to the Committee for six months on full pay. Halapua and Tu'ipelehake both noted that Tonga will need more donor assistance a few months from now to follow up on any Committee recommendations for a reform agenda. They expressed hope USG funds might be available by then.

-- Halapua suggested that the USG cover the costs for the Committee's new media position, which was not in the original budget. Given the importance transparency and outreach ought to play in the Committee's work, the Ambassador asked the Committee for a budget proposal which Washington could consider.

-- The Ambassador noted U.S. opinion-polling expertise and a wealth of American consultants on democratic-transition issues. Tu'ipelehake and Halapua said the Committee does not currently have Western-style opinion-polling on its agenda. They implied that an EU offer to fund a referendum is off the table altogether. They did express interest in possibly

tapping U.S. democracy experts at a later date, after the Committee's survey phase concludes and recommendation-drafting is under way.

-- Note that, per Ref B, Crown Prince Tupouto'a is interested in obtaining internships for a couple of young Tongan print journalists with regional U.S. newspapers.

-- Clive Edwards suggested that, as reform unfolds, it would be useful for an American "democracy-transition" expert to do a public presentation in Tonga on what people should expect of their elected representatives in a democracy.

¶10. (C) We continue to believe the USG should be visibly supportive of Tonga's political-reform process, and we will continue to work with both Washington and Tongans to find effective ways to do so. Funding the National Committee's media-relations staffer seems an attractive method, if the costs are reasonable. Sponsoring internships in the U.S. for a few young journalists also has appeal, if PD programs can assist.
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